

## Reading Holocaust Poetry: Singularity and Geoffrey Hill's 'September Song'

During the last decade of teaching an interdisciplinary module in Holocaust studies, I have found that students outside literary studies often admit that they struggle to read Holocaust poetry. They sometimes assume that the poem is an intensely subjective message that needs decoding, and contend that poems such as Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge' are unhelpfully opaque. I have attempted to persuade them that resistance to accommodation is an integral aspect of the literary: as Derek Attridge argues in *The Singularity of Literature*, literary works precisely fail to answer to 'our habitual needs in processing language'.<sup>1</sup> Literature students have then pointed out to those from other disciplines that the reader needs the objective tools of close reading in order to understand Holocaust poems properly. Such a subjective/objective dichotomy between the student groups is telling, and actually demonstrates that non-specialists in the field may have something important to tell us about reading, as a potentially missed encounter in the classroom, and in professional practice. The latter has resulted in three different ways of reading Holocaust poetry in recent years: Susan Gubar responds to such poems as 'stymied testimony', and I have argued elsewhere for the consideration of 'awkward poetics' - in which writers self-consciously discuss the problems of representation within the texts - as well as lyrics as a form of testimony in and of themselves.<sup>2</sup> This article takes these critical positions forward by exploring the interaction between recent theories of engaging with poetry more widely, and the specific case of Holocaust poetry. Can the concept of the singularity of literature fruitfully account for the 'events' of Holocaust poems, or does it obscure the importance of the metatext, and possibilities of ethical response? Also, in response to Attridge's work since *The Singularity of Literature*, can the 'objective' close readings that critics and literature students engage in be too 'powerful' for Holocaust poetry?<sup>3</sup>

Attridge demonstrates a way of reading poems in *The Singularity of Literature* that draws heavily on, but is also subtly different to, traditional close readings.<sup>4</sup> His approach attends to the singular ‘event’ of the utterance and performance of poems, and how they – and literature more widely – can be read at different times in various ways that should still be attentive to the materiality of the work. What, I ask in this article, are the challenges of singularity to the reading of Holocaust poetry, and how, conversely, might Holocaust poems challenge theories of the singular? In a subsequent article, Attridge argues persuasively that practical criticism – still widely (and rightly) taught – can fail to engage with poems adequately, since the advent of syntactical complexity, rhyme, assonance (etc.) can be found in examples of writing (he cites Bob Dylan’s lyrics) that many critics would not find singular.<sup>5</sup> Attridge’s approach to poetry in general opens out the possibility that close reading could fail to respond adequately to Holocaust poetry, if it is not attentive to the materiality and performance of the poems. In addition, practical criticism could be charged with an inability to provide an adequate ethical response to witness literature. In this context, does Attridge’s work similarly have to confront a missed opportunity with testimony, because of singularity’s resistance to the pressure of the metatext, and the ways in which Holocaust literature is consumed; for example, through Susan Suleiman’s notion of the ‘conventional’, where readers may assume the autobiographical ‘truth’ of the text due to the way in which the book is marketed?<sup>6</sup> These questions will be explored in relation to one of the most well-known Holocaust poems by a non-survivor: Geoffrey Hill’s ‘September Song’. Hill is a British poet who worked as a Professor of Literature and Religion at the University of Boston between 1988 and 2006. ‘September Song’, along with another poem from the same collection (‘Ovid in the Third Reich’), is printed in the most popular anthology of poems for Holocaust studies modules: Hilda Schiff’s *Holocaust Poetry*.<sup>7</sup> Hill’s archive was inaugurated at the University of Leeds in 2012, and includes substantial drafts of ‘September Song’: his

notebooks make the sequence of writerly events leading to the potential achievement of singularity easier to track.

Attridge's theory of singularity attempts to account for the elusive pleasures and 'potency that we experience in reading [literature]', and is opposed to the 'pragmatic utilization' of texts in instrumentalist criticism.<sup>8</sup> His book responds to a common perception of reading that is rarely commented on in literary criticism, and which is heightened when encountering shorter forms of literature such as poetry. Critics invariably use the present tense in their accounts of literary texts, which obscures the fact that when they read the same texts at different times, varied responses and foci can ensue. In relation to poetry, the reader may savour different combinations of, for example, memorable phrases, syntactical echoes, or rhythmic effects. This variety should focus the critic on the performance of literature in subsequent readings; what Attridge terms, 'the linguistic event comprehended in its eventness' (p.95). As with M. H. Abrams's recent focus on the materiality and sound of the poem, Attridge draws attention to '*a sense of [the poem's] real-time unfolding*' (p.71). In *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem and Other Essays*, Abrams similarly focuses on the utterance of poems, but – unlike Attridge – he centres on the ways in which poets 'exploit the physical aspect of language'.<sup>9</sup> Rather than respond to poems as merely vehicles for meaning, Attridge ponders 'how best to perform a text's engagements with linguistic power' (p.98), and Abrams how to explain the potency and 'palpability of [the poem's] material medium' (p.3). 'Power' is used to explicate such impressive linguistic moments several times in *The Singularity of Literature*, but it is applied negatively to some critics' deployment of language in Attridge's subsequent article on close reading, which I discuss later in this article.<sup>10</sup>

It is not surprising that, despite the widespread acclaim for Attridge's book, poetry critics have, on the whole, continued in their practice as if the 'event' of this singular criticism never happened.<sup>11</sup> During the theory wars many poetry critics were equally stubborn

(with, in this instance, good reason) in their adherence to close reading over the machinations of instrumentalist theory. Attridge accounts for this tenacity as a partly excusable adherence to the notion of a text's singularity, even if such critics would never explain their views in such terms (p.10). As he points out, 'New Critical preconceptions and procedures – born in the second third of the twentieth century – still govern a great deal of literary pedagogy and critical practice, as a glance at most "introductions to literature" will quickly reveal' (p.12). Attridge is characteristically modest in his claim that he is not proposing a new way of reading: his focus on the 'eventness' of literature has the potential to transform literary studies, even if, in reality, it is unlikely to dissuade many critics from instrumentalist approaches.<sup>12</sup> As opposed to the New Critical techniques noted above, he argues that much of current literary criticism brings pre-conceived ideas to bear on the reading of subsequent texts in order to process them efficiently (pp.6-10). Such a danger of drawing the 'other' of the literary text into the 'same' ideological tapestry surrounds the conclusions of John Barrell's critique of practical criticism, in which a focus on 'balance' in literary texts is suspiciously bourgeois, and does not take account of the class and gender status of readers.<sup>13</sup> Instead, Attridge calls for critical vigilance against unreflective instrumentalism, and ideological readings that fail in their 'responsibility to the text and to the institution of literature' (p.119). Later in this article, however, I ask: does the reader's responsibility consist primarily of an appreciation of singularity, or with the initiation of a 'committed' response that might go beyond the black print on the white page?

In his subsequent discussion of William Blake's 'The Sick Rose', Attridge utilizes familiar techniques of close reading in order to outline the singularity of the poem, including an analysis of register (p.68), ambiguity, apostrophe, and rhythm (p.69). Just as the critic must be wary of instrumentalism, however, Attridge's later research proposes that close reading itself is not a panacea, and also has an ability to distort the potential singularity of a

literary text. The critic may, for example, be so concerned with their own rhetorical pyrotechnics that the ‘otherness’ of the poem in question becomes lost in the expression of the critic’s ingenuity. Tools of close reading can in this sense be too ‘powerful’.<sup>14</sup> Attridge recounts the eminent Christopher Ricks recalling a scene in which the young William Empson impressed I.A. Richards with his bravura account of a Shakespeare sonnet. Empson is meta-critical and modest, arguing that ““You could do that with any poetry””. Ricks retorts that such superb criticism can only happen ““if the poetry truly teems””. Attridge takes issue with this *fait accompli*: it allows Ricks to conclude that pyrotechnic criticism will always arise *a priori* from intricate literature. The former then exposes the limitations of close reading in relation to Ricks’s account of Dylan’s lyrics: Ricks lauds a passage in ‘Lay Lady Lay’ due to its deployment of parallel syntax, rhyme, internal assonance and syntactical echoes, but Attridge points out that it would be easy to construct poetic lines that have the same features, but which would be banal.<sup>15</sup> Ricks’s most effective technique is to ‘draw on the language of the lines in his own description, creating the illusion of an extraordinarily close relationship between his words and Dylan’s’. Attridge follows with several examples of this ‘power’ from Ricks’s wider criticism, in which the latter’s ‘immense skill as a writer is deployed to move, delight and persuade the reader’. These examples can be extended to Ricks’s criticism on Geoffrey Hill’s work: in his essay ““The Tongue’s Atrocities”” - named after a phrase from Hill’s poem ‘History as Poetry’ - Ricks produces a swarm of Empsonian rabbits from Hill’s phrase ‘regaled with slaughter’ (from *Mercian Hymns*). The astonishing sentence reads as follows: ‘Regaled, with its regalia (and *regalo* means a gift); but ‘regaled with slaughter’ opens up a grim fissure – the poem uses the word ‘fissured’ – between the barbaric opulence and the jaded prurience: regaled with good stories, with Christmas fare (the poem speaks of ‘Christ’s mass’), and with deliciously domesticated slaughter’.<sup>16</sup> The parenthetical connections to the source text, and their assurances that the poem ‘uses’ and

‘speaks’ of similar linguistic regalia, concur with Ricks’s reading of the intervention of brackets in Hill’s work, which, he states, include and restrain at the same time (p.62). Ricks’s opulent rhetoric is barely contained in the sentence quoted above, and can be easily parodied, but only - as Attridge stresses - because the writing is so distinctive, and singular, in its own right.

If Attridge is correct that Ricks does not prove the singularity of Dylan’s lyrics, then Ricks would seem to be on surer ground in relation to Hill’s work, which, as many critics have claimed, truly does ‘teem’. Yet, thinking through the implications of Attridge’s article in relation to Holocaust poetry in particular, is it somehow obscene for a critic to revel in their own mastery of rhetoric when discussing a poem about atrocity? Would it be histrionic to suggest that that this indulgence would be symptomatic of a fascistic approach to literature, in which the critic, with apparently cool objectivity, presses their rhetorical claims above the performance of the Holocaust poem itself, and, potentially, the mediated voice of the victim? Should the critic be somehow ‘quieter’, passive, open and more attentive when reading Holocaust poems (and any wider form of Holocaust literature), rather than capitulate to the pleasure of their own ‘powerful’ readings? Should Holocaust poetry ‘speak for itself’; and, if so, how is this possible?<sup>17</sup> When students outside literary studies contend that practical criticism misses the point of Holocaust poetry, they are presenting a similar argument to Attridge about close reading, but for the wrong reason. There are disadvantages to a lack of disciplinary knowledge: Attridge would never argue that poems are overly rhetorical forms of language that, once the rhetoric is stripped away, will reveal a clear, prosaic statement. In relation to all forms of literature, not just Holocaust poetry, we should be meta-critical, close read with care, and be aware of the pitfalls of overly-rhetorical criticism: hence this article ends with a critique of my following reading of ‘September Song’ in order to draw attention to the ethical difficulties of reading that practical criticism potentially obscures.<sup>18</sup>

## **The Singularity of ‘September Song’**

How could I perform a reading of this poem that emphasises its singularity? Attridge emphasises that accounts of singular literature change in subsequent readings: after commenting on the linguistic power of ‘The Sick Rose’, he offers the caveat that, ‘if I read the poem tomorrow, I will experience its singularity differently’ (p.70). This is certainly true of my encounter with ‘September Song’ twenty years after first writing about it, in which I stressed, for example, how the diction about economy represents the economic ways (or lack of them) in which the Nazis disposed of their victims.<sup>19</sup> I would still support this reading, but wish to account for how I experience the poem differently now. Abrams’ focus on the materiality of poems influences the following reading, and the drafts in Hill’s archive make the critic appreciate more acutely the suggestive richness and precision of words such as ‘flake’. Semantic ambiguity is the starting point for Attridge’s account of the singularity of ‘The Sick Rose’: the words have a ‘density of suggestiveness’ (p.68) and ‘multiplying significations’ (p.69) which activate ‘unfurling meanings’ (p.69). Accounts of ‘September Song’ by Jon Silkin and Christopher Ricks respond fully to its semantic richness; the poem’s ‘density’ certainly constitutes one reason for the poem’s status as one of the most anthologised Holocaust poems by a non-survivor, just as much as the later stanza of awkward poetics.<sup>20</sup>

As in the opening line of ‘The Sick Rose’ (‘O rose, thou art sick’), at the beginning of ‘September Song’ the reader experiences an ‘arresting initial statement’, and a ‘strongly articulated phrasal movement’ (p.69):

Undesirable you may have been, untouchable

you were not. Not forgotten

or passed over at the proper time.<sup>21</sup>

The development from 'untouchable' to 'undesirable' is immediately striking, and Hill's notebooks reveal that he wrestled with various possibilities for the initial word: 'wretched' becomes 'polluted' on the next page, then 'Animal', which, above it, has the words 'Odious' and 'Unlovely'.<sup>22</sup> Above these rejected suggestions, a box surrounds 'Undesirable' with six ticks: it forms a concretion of Yeats's argument that a poem clicks shut like a box when the right words are found.<sup>23</sup> The semantic development from 'untouchable' to 'undesirable' is in place by the third page of the drafts, although here the words appear on separate lines:

'Undesirable' you may have been

Untouchable you were not

Neither forgotten nor passed over

At the allotted time (p.120)

The quotation marks around 'Undesirable' (which are still present in the subsequent notebook) indicate that Hill was concerned, at this stage, about a perpetrator voice entering the poem. By this point, the repetition of 'un' is already key to the euphonious language of the opening stanza, however, which continues with the repetition of 'you/you', and 'not/Not' in the final version. These performed repetitions and variations form part – if we follow Abrams and read the poem aloud – of the memorable 'evolution of the speech units' (p.5).<sup>24</sup> 'Not' following 'not' encourages the reader to think of the possible meaning of a double negative at the same time as the punctuation denies it: a critic writing in the style of Ricks might state, creating the 'illusion of an extraordinary close relationship' between the poem



and response, that the addressee is ‘not not’ forgotten; in other words, the addressee is indeed forgotten in the poem.<sup>25</sup>

Any performance of this stanza would stress, as well as the repetitions, the bilabial plosives of the /b/ and /p/ sounds, which create an underlying tone of bitterness which works against the perpetrator rhetoric. The euphony and semantic depth are also heightened through the ambiguity of address. As an ‘event’ of reading, the reader is drawn to the epigraph before this first stanza (*‘born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42’*), and must wonder about the identity of the addressee.<sup>26</sup> The archives reveal that the poem was originally entitled ‘Elegy’, and then ‘Elegy for E-P’.<sup>27</sup> ‘E-P’ refers to ‘Edita Polláková’: as well as the deportation date, the drafts include in the potential epigraph the information: ‘died Auschwitz, Oct. 4.1944’, and ‘for a little Jewish girl, died 24/9/42’.<sup>28</sup> Polláková produced one of the pictures that was included in a collection of children’s drawings from Terezín: Hill came across her work in an exhibition, and would have immediately noticed the proximity of their birth dates.<sup>29</sup> Much of Hill’s work – as in *The Triumph of Love* – conveys his sense (and relief) that he was too young to be part of the events of World War Two that nevertheless continue to haunt him: the Polláková date indicates what happened to some of the children of the same age on mainland Europe. Hill’s decision to excise some of the information about Polláková – no doubt because an extended epigraph would have been clumsy - means that, in a performance of the poem, the unnamed child is a specific addressee, and representative of all child victims. She is ‘not not forgotten’: the poem remembers her through the epigraph, but then ‘forgets’ her as a specific victim. The excision means that the poem works as a more general Holocaust elegy, but this process of achieving singularity, set against the horror of the signified referent of Polláková’s death, points to the possibility of aesthetic larceny that Hill will explore further in the well-known third stanza.

Thoughts of artistic exploitation are inseparable from the perpetrator rhetoric of words such as ‘estimated’, ‘sufficient’, and ‘routine’ in the second stanza, which I focussed on in my previous reading:

As estimated, you died. Things marched,

sufficient, to that end.

Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented

terror, so many routine cries.<sup>30</sup>

‘Things marched’ creates an intertextual link to ‘Things happen’ in ‘Ovid in the Third Reich’, the opening poem of *King Log*.<sup>31</sup> After the recent ‘turn’ to perpetrators in Holocaust studies, it can also be seen more clearly that the latter poem is prescient in its engagement with a perpetrator perspective. ‘Things happen’ intimates the speaker’s lack of control over the ‘troughs of blood’, whereas the poem as a whole presents someone at least complicit with historical events. Similarly, ‘Things marched’ avoids culpability; the phrase may also echo the *March of Time*, which was a newsreel series shown in movie theatres between 1935 to 1951, and which suggests, in its title, a (potentially fascistic) inevitability of historical ‘progress’.<sup>32</sup> Alongside this semantic density, reading the poem aloud draws attention to the stanza’s materiality: the repeated /t/s, and velar plosive of the /k/ in ‘Zyklon’, again evoke a bitter and ironic tone that undermines the perpetrator rhetoric. The harsh /t/ sounds work most memorably in the shortest line, both in sense of the graphic surface, and number of syllables. ‘[S]ufficient, to that end’ repeats the sound three times, and emphasises the horror that ‘end’ implies, but the poem – without the lost knowledge of Polláková’s death - cannot represent. The ‘teeming’ diction also counters the expectations of other words: the reader might expect ‘Efficient’ rather than ‘Sufficient’; in other words, the process of killing was sufficient but

chaotic, and certainly not efficient. ‘Sufficient’ then reaches forward to the variation of ‘Just so much’: the initial word at the beginning of the line stresses the irony between ‘Just’ in its noun and adverb form; these actions are patently only ‘just’ from a perpetrator perspective. This Ricksian rhetoric would also stress the semantic link between the ‘patented/ Terror’ of a totalitarian government and the ‘leather’ before ‘patented’. As the reader performs the poem, the word initially seems to qualify ‘leather’: ‘patented’ refers to japanned leather with a glossy finish. As with the emphasis on ‘Just’ at the beginning of the antecedent line, the stress on ‘terror’ at the beginning of the next one then underlines the chilling concept of a Government-controlled distribution of fear.<sup>33</sup>

After the euphony and semantic richness of the first two stanzas, it is hard to recreate the ‘distinctiveness and surprisingness’ many readers sense when they then read, for the first time, the most famous lines of this poem (and post-Holocaust poetry as a whole).<sup>34</sup> Early on in the drafts, the third stanza appears as follows:

I have made  
  
An elegy for myself. That  
  
Is true.<sup>35</sup>

This self-castigatory section is almost complete long before the other stanzas, and indicates that singularity for artists sometimes comes more easily than achieving ‘the same’ (such as metrical regularity). There are only slight variations across the two notebooks, as when Hill extrapolates:

[...] That  
  
Is true. For me only, [...]

[line break]

Is such a luxury allowed (p.37).

The lines are genuinely original due to the introduction into the cultural matrix of what Attridge terms ‘a germ, a foreign body, that cannot be accounted for by its existing codes and practices’.<sup>36</sup> This stanza destabilizes the poem, and the genre of Holocaust poetry. When the poem was composed in 1965-6, no other post-Holocaust poet had introduced the possibility of aesthetic larceny into a poem so blatantly. This ‘nested’ singularity (p.64) simultaneously opens out the chance of resisting exploitation through awkward poetics, which are embodied in a rigorous examination of metre and syntax as it operates in the stanza. After the astonishing declaration, the break on ‘made’ is heightened in performance, and works against the syntax; the metre then reverts to iambic tetrameter (as in the line before ‘I have made’). This metrical break on ‘made’ is significant: referring to the ‘making’ of the whole poem, it deliberately upsets the rhythm of the iambs in the previous two lines. Metrics are here not just aesthetic drapery: they form an integral part of the poem’s uniqueness and singularity.<sup>37</sup>

The taut metrics of the third stanza then give way to the /t/ sounds of the penultimate stanza, which underline the obscene luxuriousness of the poet’s September, and pre-Holocaust aestheticisations of the autumn:

September fattens on vines. Roses  
  
flake from the wall. The smoke  
  
of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

As I have argued previously, there are echoes of Keats and Hardy’s work in this stanza.<sup>38</sup> These links explain the poem’s uniqueness, but not its singularity. In performance, the velar plosives in ‘flake’ and ‘smoke’ undermine the opulence of the fattening vines. As Hill has

argued in relation to the exactitude of rhyme, such effects must appear to the reader ‘as natural as breathing’, and yet they are the product of intense labour.<sup>39</sup> In the notebooks, Hill works his way towards ‘flake’ after several variations: roses first ‘Crack’ and ‘Drop’ from the wire, and then ‘decay’, ‘burst’, ‘gash’ and ‘soften’ on the next page, before ‘Flake from’ is circled with approval; ‘blood-red roses’ is rejected as too clumsy.<sup>40</sup> Semantic precision then continues in the last line and stanza, in which, instead of the ‘crescendo of intensity’ in ‘The Sick Rose’, we experience the singularity of memorable bathos: ‘**This** is plenty. **This** is more **than enough**’. ‘This’ could refer to the last stanza, the penultimate stanza, and the entire poem: Hill emphasises the ambiguity with two metrical breaks on the most important word, which – along with the punctuation – slow the pace of the line. Hill’s sensitivity to metrics emphasises the caution and forbearance of the post-Holocaust poet, but ‘This’ also ‘challenges cultural norms’, and its ‘web of associations’, in which we are meant to pity the child victim automatically.<sup>41</sup> Just one broken pentameter (the only one in the poem) is enough: Hill is wary – to rephrase Wilfred Owen – of putting too much pity into the poetry, and questions the troubling ease in which readers might be drawn into expressing whatever pity and empathy might mean.<sup>42</sup> Clearly, ‘enough’ is an important word in the development of the poem, since it occurs first in a different line: ‘Just so much Zyklon and rubber, enough/ Terror, so many routine lies’.<sup>43</sup> In the context of *King Log*, ‘enough’ extends to the palinode of ‘September Song’, ‘I Had Hope When Violence Was Ceas’t’. This poem is printed opposite ‘September Song’ (p.18): it adopts the voice of a camp inmate, and risks being ‘enough’ after only four lines, with descriptions of the ‘flesh oozing towards its last outrage.’ ‘[E]nough’, the emphatic last iamb, also functions like ‘finished’, the last word of ‘Funeral Music’ (p.32): both words, rich in semantic allusion, draw attention to the poems’ ‘snapping shut like a box’; the dying soldier in ‘Funeral Music’ cries that he is not finished at the same time as, mortally wounded, he is finished, and the poem is finishing. Manuscript versions of

‘Funeral Music’ separate the drafts of ‘September Song’: the notebooks prove that Hill was thinking about the ending of both poems simultaneously, as the repeated phrase “‘I have not finished’” is written into the early drafts of ‘September Song’.<sup>44</sup>

The singular last line also draws attention to the finite nature of singularity. For a variety of reasons, a poem read in a hundred years’ time may not have the same resonance as it does today. ‘September Song’ is an astonishing product of its historical moment, written at a time when post-Holocaust writers were beginning to intensify their engagements with war atrocities, particularly after the Eichmann Trial in 1961. The poem challenges the notion of Holocaust representation, and errs on the side of a respectful silence, or the poetics of awkwardness. Such deliberations, and self-censorship, are evident in some of the first lines in the notebook, which were rejected as, presumably, stilted and overly pious:

Let them keep

[line break]

their dignity

of silence in death (6)

Hill initially wishes Holocaust victims to be ‘silent’ at the same time as he threatens their dignity by beginning to write about that silence. However, if, nearly fifty years after the completion of the poem, we are moving into an era of ‘impious’ representation – as Matthew Boswell argues – then it is possible to imagine a time in which this tentativeness towards Holocaust representation will be regarded quizzically.<sup>45</sup> Artists and critics in the US and Britain do not, over a hundred years after the events, worry about aesthetic larceny in relation to the Crimean War (1853-56) or the American Civil War (1861-65). ‘Locust Songs’ in *King Log* contains a section on the massacre at Shiloh Church in 1862, but, with the lack of

intervening awkward poetics, there are no lines that counterbalance the arresting aesthetics of the ‘Bland vistas milky with Jehovah’s calm’ (p.17); such imagery is clearly not ‘enough’ in the context of the Civil War. Boswell discusses the impieties of Sylvia Plath and W.D. Snodgrass in, for example, the form of the latter’s imagined Nazi monologues in *The Führer Bunker*: as the Holocaust continues ‘dying’ – as Guber puts it – we are likely to encounter more post-Holocaust poems in the style of Plath and Snodgrass rather than ‘September Song’. Nevertheless, and intriguingly, the drafts of Hill’s poem contain lines of impiety that do not feature in the final version:

His one idea in

love was being

sucked off by his

friends’ wives.<sup>46</sup>

These words appear on the same page as Hill wrestles with the possibilities for ‘flake’, and are no doubt an aside rather than a proposed stanza of ‘September Song’. Even so, they indicate that the respectful tone of the poem has to be carefully constructed, rather than being an effortless default position: such singularity has to be ‘tuned from the clamour’ of competing – and sometimes impious – discourses both within and outside the notebooks.<sup>47</sup>

### **The ethics of close reading**

In the reading above, I have outlined why I think ‘September Song’ is the most memorable post-Holocaust poem in terms of its singularity and materiality, rather than any instrumentalist reason extraneous to the text. However, it is possible that – as with Attridge’s

reading of Ricks - close readings of the poem could be too 'powerful', over-determined, and insular in their focus on the text.<sup>48</sup> If Hill's short poem is 'enough' about Polláková, maybe the critic should be aware of when they have written 'enough' on an aspect of post-Holocaust literature. If this article ended before the subsection, would there be a failure to apprehend, or an obfuscation of, the limitations of critical rhetoric in my reading above? Perhaps there is something beyond the aesthetic trickery of the elegy for itself, and the singularity of its performance, that is important in reading and apprehending the poem. Any account of the poem's singularity will emphasise its literariness, but does close reading obscenely forget the metatext, the fate of the child, and neglect the possibility of a different kind of readerly witnessing? Just as Tom Paulin was appalled at Ricks's attention to linguistic minutiae in *Minatour*, the former critic might be exasperated to read someone discussing the poetry of atrocity in terms of fricatives.<sup>49</sup>

Singularity might be critiqued as indulging in an ahistorical 'divine liberty', apparent, as Albert Camus writes, "'in the work of Mozart'".<sup>50</sup> Camus argues instead that contemporary art loses "'Ease'" with its "'constant obligation'" to history, so that the artist is now "'lying'" or "'indulging in useless woes if he pays no attention to history's woes'" (p.115). Yet singular writing can still engage with the uneasiness of history, as Attridge demonstrates with his account of Mongane Wally Serote's 'The actual Dialogue' in *The Singularity of Literature* (pp.112-8): this poem was written during the era of Apartheid in South Africa, and the 'Context is already there in the words' (p.114). Instead of recourse to instrumentalist metanarratives, a 'charged' witnessing must therefore confront the large questions of art and everyday life, such as, How do we respond to otherness within texts, and beyond our own idiocultures? Yet an adequate ethical response to a poem such as 'September Song' cannot be the impossibility of thinking about the poem constantly, as Primo Levi demands of his poem 'Shemà'.<sup>51</sup> It might constitute the more manageable response of dwelling on the poem for a



while, and ‘living’ with it, but this could be a self-deceptive ethical move in that, as Hill puts it in another poem, the text may be forgotten next week as the reader moves on to more pressing events.<sup>52</sup> Attridge’s work draws attention to the ethics of accounting for a text’s singularity and literariness, but, having done so in relation to ‘September Song’, is it unethical to finish with the poem, and then, as Patricia Yaeger writes in relation to consuming trauma, put the text away and the butter the next bagel?<sup>53</sup>

How, in other words, do we - to re-phrase Paul Celan - witness for the witness?<sup>54</sup> What does it mean to be part of a ‘chain of witnesses’, as Shoshana Felman discusses in *The Future of Testimony*?<sup>55</sup> In Felman’s essay, the chain consists of literary and philosophical figures who engage with each other’s work, from Sigmund Freud through Jacques Derrida to Cathy Caruth, but what does it mean for lesser mortals to respond ethically to autobiography, and vicarious testimony? One answer is to respond carefully, as Attridge suggests, to the aesthetics of representation, and avoid a reading that colonises the experience of the other: poets such as Wilfred Owen and Charlotte Delbo deliberately resist such attempts at over-identification with their autobiographical material.<sup>56</sup> For Attridge, the ethics of ‘sympathy’ are more productive than empathy: whilst there is a danger that ‘a term like this may seem to imply a simple matching between mind and work, it helpfully captures something of the positive openness that characterizes a fully responsive reading’ (p.81). How, however, can the critic be sympathetic towards the absent voice of the victim in a post-Holocaust text? An openness to ‘September Song’ must acknowledge that there is no metatext, in the sense that Polláková’s fate - beyond the death date - is unknown: the poet has the choice to desist from writing a poem, to let the victims keep ‘their silence of dignity/ in death’, or, alternatively, to elegise the few details we know about Polláková in a more general elegy, where the material demands of poetry strive (as Hill’s notebooks indicate) for singularity, with the self-conscious injection of awkward poetics. In other Holocaust poems, the metatext functions differently: in

Jerzy Ficowski's '5.8.1942: In Memory of Janusz Korczak', it is 'in' the text in Attridge's sense that it is embodied in the poem's words (p.114), but it is also considered outside the poem in a footnote.<sup>57</sup> Ficowski's poem, like 'September Song', is included in *Holocaust Poetry*: a twenty-line footnote explains Korczak's refusal to escape from the Warsaw ghetto so he could continue to look after orphaned children, and his subsequent decision to accompany them to Treblinka (p.63). Even allowing for the 'flattening' effects of translation, and the arresting line about the 'scurrying lice of fear' (p.62), a suspicion remains that the metatextual narrative about the remarkable doctor is more important than the materiality of the poem itself. Poetry functions here not as potentially singular literature, but as an instrumental route to an astonishingly heroic narrative.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, the singularity of 'September Song' is itself inextricable from an ethical stance. As I noted in *Holocaust Poetry*, critics could still dismiss awkward poetics as sanctimonious, and still exploitative, but the alternative is silence, or unreflective poetics that blithely aestheticise historical atrocity.<sup>59</sup>

These examples indicate that Holocaust poetry, even when examined alongside considerations of the metatext, does not crudely refute the notion of singularity. Far from it: as Attridge argues, the discovery of, for example, previously unknown biographical details can profoundly change the way a reader interprets singular literature. In relation to 'The Sick Rose', 'Further information about the conditions under which Blake wrote the poem, about the literary and popular traditions on which he was drawing, about the connotation of words current in his time, may all feed into the singularity I both create and undergo when I next read it' (p.70). However, the example of the Ficowski poem indicates that in studies of Holocaust poetry – and Holocaust literature more widely – the metatext has the potential to function as a fetish that obscures the fact that there are many well-meaning but poorly written examples of Holocaust poems. Reading Holocaust poetry should provide more than the disarming sentiment displayed in, for example, Adam Zych's anthology *The Auschwitz*

*Poems*: the opening lyric, Janka Abrami's 'Last Lullaby', imagines the author's sister accompanying her daughter into the gas chamber, and ends with the whisper of 'the last lullaby of Auschwitz:/ "Shash, my darling, Shash..."'.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the historian Otto Dov Kulka admits that the "'safe and well-paved way of scientific discipline'" does not allow him to confront, and make sense, of his childhood memories of Birkenau: similarly, is it possible that the disciplinary pressures of close reading entail missed encounters with poems such as 'Last Lullaby'?<sup>61</sup> Yet reading literature, Attridge argues, 'understood in its difference from other kinds of writing (and other kinds of reading), solves no problems and saves no souls' (p.4). What Holocaust poetry certainly does do, however, is focalise the specific ways of reading relevant to all forms of testimony, autobiography, and memoir, as opposed to literature in general. The context, as Attridge argues, is 'in' the text, 'already there in the words' (p.114), but when the metatext is obscured - as in case of false testimony - one of the primary tasks of the reader is to pick through the pitfalls of the 'conventional', and address the key issue of who is writing to whom. Some readers, such as Sue Vice, may detect singularity in Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*, but it still makes a vast difference to reading, interpreting and evaluating the book as to whether the author was a child survivor of the Holocaust, like Otto Dov Kulka, or a child living in a Switzerland orphanage.<sup>62</sup> As Wilkomirski's novel demonstrates, the singular can exist aside from such troubling matters of authorship and library classification. The specific case of false testimony also demonstrates that singularity, so important to the 'pleasures and the potency' of literature can, like the power of close reading, be unethical.

1 Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), p.120.

2 Susan Gubar, 'The Long and Short of Holocaust Verse', *New Literary History*, 35: 3 (summer 2004), 443-69 (also available online at <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>); Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005) and *Poetry as Testimony* (New York/London: Routledge, 2014).

3 Derek Attridge discusses close readings that are too 'powerful' in 'Conjurers turn tricks on wizards' coat-tails' (<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&s>). This article originated in Attridge's inaugural lecture at the University of York (June 2006), and is work in progress.

4 In *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), John Barrell points out that there are many different versions of practical criticism, yet it is still possible to generalise (albeit problematically) about the assumptions that underwrite the practice. Extracts from the introduction to this book are anthologised in Dennis Walder's *Literature in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.131-7, p.137.

5 Attridge, 'Conjurers turn tricks on wizards' coat-tails', n.p.n.

6 Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'Problems of Memory and Factuality in Recent Holocaust Memoirs: Wilkomirski/Wiesel', *Poetics Today*, 21: 3 (Fall 2000), 543-59, p.546.

7 Hilda Schiff, *Holocaust Poetry* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p.96. For the differences between Holocaust and post-Holocaust poetry, see Rowland's *Holocaust Poetry*, pp.1-3.

8 Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, pp.1, 9. Rather than summarise Attridge's well-known argument in detail at this point, I return to his book throughout the following close reading of 'September Song'.

9 M.H. Abrams, *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem and Other Essays* (London/New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), p.2. In practice, Abrams's readings account for much more than the physical utterance of poetry: like Attridge's response to the poems in *The Singularity of Literature*, much of Abrams's writing necessarily draws on the wider efficacies of practical criticism. An account of poems that focused only on delivery might be able to account for particular readerly pleasures, and the uniqueness of the writing, but it could not, on its own, respond to their singularity as a whole.

10 Attridge refers to the ‘power’ and ‘potency’ of literature: literature has a ‘peculiar potency not possessed by other linguistic practices’ (p.5), but critics whose professional lives depend on it can exaggerate its ‘powerful effects’ (p.8), and its ‘potency as a political weapon’ (p.8). He also hopes that even though the examples in his short book are all poems, readers will not find that this detracts from the account of singularity (p.3). His readers are directed towards the companion book *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2004), which engages with similar issues in relation to Coetzee’s (often poetic) prose.

11 For example, the book won the European Society for the Study of English Book Award in 2006. Critics interested in innovative poetics, such as Simon Jarvis and Robert Purves, have been attentive to Attridge’s propositions, but this is not my experience of poetry critics, and criticism, as a whole since 2004.

12 The focus on singularity is even more unlikely in the current climate of Higher Education in the UK, in which critics are expected, through grant applications, promotions, and interviews, to demonstrate the economic and social impact of their research, often before the process of research has actually begun.

13 Barrell, pp.131-7. This is not to state that the concept of singularity itself is not ideological, even as it resists ideology.

14 Attridge, ‘Conjurers turn tricks on wizards’ coat-tails’.

15 Attridge constructs a couplet with the same features: ‘I stand and read this lecture here to you/ I stand and keep on reading though I’m blue.’ When Empson draws rabbits from the hat of Shakespeare’s sonnet, the interesting question is – if the reader is not just meant to trace the author’s intended linguistic manipulation – at what point does language begin to limit interpretation? Poems can often surprise authors years after composition with syntactical links and sound echoes that go beyond Rick’s concept of ‘unconscious intention’, which overstates the poet’s control over such matters. Later in the article, Attridge ponders the thin line between ‘scholarly identification carried out in all earnestness and free association indulged in with wicked glee.’ Most critics would have to admit, if pressed, that their critical reading surrounding a book is always a result of a mixture of serendipity and logic.

16 Christopher Ricks, “‘The Tongue’s Atrocities’”, in *Modern Critical Views: Geoffrey Hill*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York/New Haven: Chelsea House publishers, 1986), pp.55-68, p.56.

17 It might also be possible for a ‘flatter’ style of criticism – as in this article – to be dishonest. Whereas rhetorical criticism draws attention to its pyrotechnics, it would be possible for the ‘flatter’ style to obscure its swarm of rabbits by presenting the criticism, as in realist prose, innocuously as the truth.

18 The word ‘practical’ in the common phrase is telling: it suggests that the practice responds objectively to the ways in which literature actually works.

19 Antony Rowland, *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust*, pp.23-26.

20 Jon Silkin, ‘The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill’, in *Modern Critical Views: Geoffrey Hill*, pp.17-40.

21 Hilda Schiff, *Holocaust Poetry*, p.96. For the semantic ambiguity of ‘Undesirable’, ‘untouchable’ and ‘passed over’, see Silkin’s essay, pp.19-20.

22 Geoffrey Hill, ‘*King Log* notebook IV (1965-6)’, 20c Hill/2/1/6 (notebook 6 in the catalogue), pp.36, 37.

23 In *Acceptable Words: Essays on the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), Jeffrey Wainwright points out that Hill is endorsing ‘Yeats’s description that “a poem comes right with a click like the closing of a box”’ (p.1).

24 The repetition and utterance of ‘you’ also echoes (whether intentional or not) the memorable play on ‘you’ and ‘*du*’ sounds in that other, more infamous, post-Holocaust poem, Sylvia Plath’s ‘Daddy’ (Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1981), pp.222-223). *Ariel* was published during the drafting of ‘September Song’, in 1965.

25 Attridge, ‘Conjurers turn tricks on wizards’ coat-tails’.

26 Schiff, p.96.

27 Notebook 6, p.36; Hill, 'King Log notebook V (1965-6)', 20c Hill/2/1/6 (notebook 7 in the catalogue), n.p.n.

28 Notebook 6, p.36; notebook 7, n.p.n. I must thank Hannah Copley, and Jeffrey Wainwright for passing this information on to me before I began work on the archives. The name is spelt 'Pollakova' in all other references I can find.

29 See *Children's Drawings and Poems, Terezín, 1942-1944*, ed. Hana Volavková, trans. Jeanne Němcová (Praha: Státní židovské museum, 1959).

30 Schiff, p.96.

31 Geoffrey Hill, *King Log* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1968), p.13.

32 In *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust* (pp.33-7) I discuss the effects of footage of the camps on British poets.

33 Notebook 7 has the manuscripts lines 'Just so much Zyklon + rubber, enough/ Terror, so may routine lies' (n.p.n.). '[L]ies' is then changed to 'strokes' and finally 'CRIES'. If 'rubber' was meant to refer to the Auschwitz complex, the ultimate deletion was sensible: famously, no rubber was produced during the war in the Buna plant.

34 Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p.65.

35 Notebook 6, p.36.

36 *The Singularity of Literature*, p.56-7.

37 The awkward poetics work self-consciously against the striving for aesthetic perfection, and paradoxically draw us to the metatextual details (of E.P.) by focussing momentarily on the poet-figure. The parentheses, that Ricks analyses in detail, occur first in notebook 7:

(I have made  
An elegy for myself. That  
Is true)

In early drafts of the poem in notebook 6, Hill attempts vicarious representation in lines such as: 'Like one borne (crossed out, with 'wrenched' above) away/ Terrified' (p.36). Hill soon abandons this tactic, however: 'Terrified' becomes the abstract 'terror'. In notebook 7, there are specific references to the museum at Auschwitz I that accompany the awkward poetics: 'the hair' and 'gold[?] frames' (of glasses, presumably) are 'excessive'. These fragments are transformed into the magisterial last line, and into abstractions: 'terror' and 'untouchable' (etc.) are a sign of the poet's wariness towards representation. As the gap indicates at the end of the first line of the third stanza, he has made 'nothing' in the context of E.P.'s plight. Like the smoke in the subsequent stanza, the poem is potentially just rhetoric that is complicit in its 'forgetting' of E.P. We have also here the ghost of the sonnet form, as the 'Song' in the title (the Italian origin of 'sonnet') subtly reminds us. Some readers will object to this, since not all poems of fourteen lines are necessarily sonnets. Yet by 'ghost' of the sonnet form I mean that these awkward poetics occur around the site of the 'turn' in the traditional sonnet (after the octet), and that the last two stanzas split up the final quatrain in a more traditional sonnet (with the half rhymes roses/smoke/eyes/enough) in order to emphasise the last line. The notebooks also reveal that Hill was working on 'September Song' at the same time as he was drafting the sequence of unrhymed sonnets that make up 'Funeral Music'. After two pages of fragments of 'September Song' (6), there are numerous versions of different sections of the longer poem. In the construction of these sonnets, Hill sometimes numbers empty lines from one to fourteen, and then fills in the lines as he goes along, sometimes out of sequence. Wrestling with an ingrained form is how many poets work: sometimes the 'ghost' of a form is thus difficult to break when the writer has been working in a particular form for a long time (hence Pound's famous declaration in Canto 81 for poets to self-consciously break the pentameter). 'September Song' brings up the 'ghost' of the form, but then breaks it with the differences in line length, metrical variations, split quatrain at the end, and awkward poetics of the third stanza.

38 *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust*, pp.25-6.

39 Hill commented on rhyme in this way at a reading in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

40 Hill is here commenting on previous drafts that he has pasted under the last typescript (dated opposite 21/10/66) (notebook 7, n.p.n.).

41 *The Singularity of Literature*, p.69.

42 *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. John Stallworthy (Vol ii: The Manuscripts of the Poems and the Fragments) (London: Oxford University Press/Chatto and Windus/ The Hogarth Press, 1983), p.48.



43 Notebook 7, n.p.n. '[L]ies' are also 'strokes' before 'cries'.

44 Notebook 6, p.36.

45 Matthew Boswell, *Holocaust Impiety* (Basingstoke: PalgraveMacmillan, 2011). Arguably, most, if not all, Holocaust representations contain impiety. For example, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* might be placed in a 'pious' selection, yet the directors' infamous interviewing technique could be interpreted as an impious response to the victims. However, Boswell's book represents a timely and convincing engagement with the work of post-Holocaust culture as artists and critics move away from debates about respectful silence.

46 Notebook 7, n.p.n.

47 Jeffrey Wainwright, *Reading Poetry: the Basics* (London: Routledge, 2004), 1<sup>st</sup> edn, p.100.

48 Is there also a connection between practical criticism, masculinity, and mild autism?

49 I am referring here to Paulin's attack on Ricks's criticism in *Minatour*, (London: Faber, 1992), p.278-79. He is particularly irked by Ricks's account of Hill's hyphens: 'To read Ricks on the hyphen is to taste that abject world of trivialising critical duncery which filled Pope with such savage despair' (p.278).

50 Quoted in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York/London: Routledge, 1992), p.115.

51 Primo Levi, *If This Is A Man/ The Truce*, trans. S. Woolf (London: Abacus, 1987 [1958]), p.17.

52 Hill, 'Of Commerce and Society', in *For the Unfallen* (London: André Deutsch Limited, 1959), p.51.

53 Patricia Yaeger, 'Consuming Trauma; or, The Pleasures of Merely Circulating', in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony and Community*, ed. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pp.25-51, p.46.

54 This is rephrased from the last lines from Paul Celan's , 'Aschenglorie hinter' from *Atemwende*.

55 Shoshana Felman, 'The Chain of Witnesses' in *The Future of Testimony*, eds. Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland (London/New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

56 See my articles on Owen and Delbo in *Poetry as Testimony* (London/New York: Routledge, 2014).

57 *Holocaust Poetry*, pp.62-63.

58 In Charles Reznikoff's 'Holocaust', excerpted in *Holocaust Poetry*, the metatext is 'in' the poem in that the long poem consists of poetic transcriptions of court accounts of Nazi atrocity. The poem fulfils the Objectivist edicts for a lack of metaphor and reduced authorial presence, but it does not work in Attridge's terms as singular writing. The poetry differs from the original testimony in that the splitting of sentences and phrases into lines attempts to surround the lines with a prayer-like attentiveness to the language, as in one of the lines quoted in Schiff's anthology: 'the cars crowded' (p.78). Readers may concentrate on the details of the courtroom testimony more when rendered in lines akin to scripture rather than written or vocalised prose, but the overall effect is instrumentalist, drawing the reader to think about signified referents rather than the materiality of the poem itself.

59 *Holocaust Poetry*, p.13.

60 *The Auschwitz Poems*, ed. and trans. Adam A. Zych (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 1999), p.13. When Attridge links singularity to innovation, the history of Western art consists of artists 'constantly searching for new modes of expression to exploit, new facets of human life to represent, new shades of feeling to capture' (p.2): the verbs 'exploit' and 'capture' are telling, and indicate that artistic ventures can, as many critics and philosophers have noted (Theodor Adorno among them), unethically exploit the experience of the other in order to create great art.

61 Quoted in Robert Eaglestone, 'The other side of the fence' (review of Otto Dov Kulka's *Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death*), *Times Higher Education*, 24-30 January 2013, 46-7, p.46.

62 Sue Vice, 'Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* and Holocaust Envy: "Why Wasn't I There Too?"', in *Representing the Holocaust: In Honour of Bryan Burns* (London and Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003),

